DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 500 CS 014 363

AUTHOR	Johnson, Peter
TITLE	Building Effective Programs for Summer Learning.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	9p.; Produced for the America Reads Initiative.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text at: http://www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/sum_build.doc.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Education; *Individual Development; *Learning Experience; *Lower Class Students; *Reading Improvement; *Summer Programs
IDENTIFIERS	Learning Environments; *Program Continuation; Program Objectives

ABSTRACT

Summer learning comes from reading books, singing songs, playing games, listening to stories, taking trips, and all kinds of other fun activities that kids rarely realize are actually good for them. However, this kind of summer learning can be more difficult for children of low-income and other disadvantaged families. Careful analysis of statistics on the academic gap between high- and low-income children's reading scores on the California Achievement Test illustrates the importance of summer learning. Disadvantaged kids' summer losses are especially large during the breaks between the first three or four years of school, and so preventing these losses could make the gap much smaller. Summer learning programs, encompassing everything from summer camps to library reading clubs, summer schools to cultural enrichment programs, are playing an increasingly important role in making this happen. The best ways to reach the children who need the program most are: form partnerships with schools; form partnerships with other services; and make the program accessible and convenient for parents. Some effective ways for the children to have quality experiences throughout the summer are: involve kids' parents; involve volunteers; and make learning fun for everybody. Once a program is reaching the children who need it the most, the major challenge is keeping the program going strong and working to improve it. Three good ways to keep a program going strong are: maintain strong partnerships; foster a sense of community; and constantly strive to do better. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 452 500

Building Effective Programs for Summer Learning.

by Peter Johnson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

P. Johnson

CS 014 363

Building Effective Programs for Summer Learning

By Peter Johnson
America Reads Summer 2000 Intern, Yale University

Introduction: Who needs summer programs?

Although summertime may mean a vacation from the classroom, it should never be a break in any child's intellectual development. Fortunately, many children have abundant opportunities for summer learning in their homes and communities, and as a result most kids gain points on standardized tests from June to September, even if they haven't entered a school or opened a textbook the during the months in between. This summer learning comes from reading books, singing songs, playing games, listening to stories, taking trips, and all kinds of other fun activities that kids rarely realize are actually good for them.

However, this kind of summer learning can be more difficult for children of low-income and other disadvantaged families. On average, these kids have less access to material resources such as books and computers, fewer enriching experiences such as family trips and summer camps, as well as fewer high-quality educational interactions with their parents, whose time and energy are often consumed by the challenges of struggling with poverty, raising a family as a single parent, and countless other obstacles.

Data from Baltimore's Beginning School Study, reported by Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle (1996), show that the academic gap between rich and poor children, as measured by test scores, increases throughout the elementary school years. In the Baltimore study, the difference between high- and low-income children's reading scores on the California Achievement Test (as a percent of the standard deviation of scores) grew from 68% in first grade to 98% in third grade, and to 114% in eighth grade.

Careful analysis of these statistics illustrates the importance of summer learning. Having tested students in the fall and in the spring, Alexander and Entwisle found that all children make gains at essentially the same rate during the school year, and that only during the summer months do disadvantaged kids' scores fall behind. These summer losses, added up over the years, seem to be the major reason why the academic gap between low- and high-income children grows throughout the elementary school years. Disadvantaged kids' summer losses are especially large during the breaks between the first three or four years of school, and so preventing these losses, particularly over the first few summers, could make the gap much smaller. Summer learning programs, encompassing everything from summer camps to library reading clubs, summer schools to cultural enrichment programs, are playing an increasingly important role in making this happen.

Reaching the neediest kids

In order for a summer learning program to help erase the academic gap, it is crucial to include the children who need the program the most. This can be a formidable challenge, since low-income and other disadvantaged families are often those least likely to be active members of their communities, visit libraries, or sign their kids up for summer activities. Fortunately, there are a number of ways to reach out to the neediest children. Here are three that may prove helpful:

1. Form partnerships with schools.

Local public schools are where the neediest kids spend the rest of the year, and so can be very helpful in identifying and recruiting the children who need summer programs the most. Teachers, tutors, principals and counselors can all make recommendations about which students most need summer help, and can also serve as important links to children's parents, playing an important role in persuading them to have their children participate.

Examples of programs reaching out to schools include the St. Louis Public Library's summer reading club, which reports that one of its most exciting developments is a growing partnership with the public schools in that city. The school district has asked the staff at its 80 summer schools to work closely with the library program, and has even assigned three full-time staff members to work specifically on bringing the summer reading club to its at-risk summer students. The Heads Up tutoring and mentoring program in Washington, DC, molds itself to meet individual schools' needs: for example, in a school that needs a program for third graders, Heads Up will focus its program in that school on the third grade. In Columbus, librarians visit the public schools each spring to promote their summer reading programs, and the schools have helped the librarians with everything from encouraging at-risk students to participate to filming TV commercials.

2. Form partnerships with other services.

Many summer programs that are successful in recruiting needy kids do so by forming strong links with other services that reach out to the most disadvantaged families in their communities. By partnering with these other services, they reach the children who need them the most.

Good examples of programs linked with other services include West Virginia's Energy Express, a summer learning program partnering with the Summer Food Service Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Reach Out and Read, a national program aimed at promoting early childhood literacy, has volunteers read books to children while they wait in doctors' waiting rooms, and instructs physicians to talk with parents about reading with their children. The Houston READ Commission reaches out to the children of students in its adult literacy programs. The library program in Columbus has formed relationships with organizations like the YMCA and Boys & Girls

clubs, which pull in many at-risk kids who wouldn't normally take part in a summer reading program.

3. Make the program accessible and convenient for parents.

Another important way to reach the neediest children is make the summer program accessible and convenient for their parents. Ways to make a program more convenient include providing transportation, locating in a convenient place, scheduling the program to fit in with parents' work schedules and day-care needs, and providing meals or snacks.

The Houston READ Commission works with children of its adult literacy students while the parents themselves are being tutored. The Heads Up program has been able to recruit many at-risk children by fulfilling the child-care needs that many of their parents faced. Carole Fiore, a library program specialist at the State Library of Florida, emphasizes the need to provide programs in the places where they are needed most, including housing projects, government-sponsored child care centers, Head Start centers, hospitals and other health care agencies, migrant worker camps, inner cities and small rural towns. She suggests that summer programs should switch from an attitude of "here we are!" to one of "here we come!"

Getting kids learning (and excited about it!)

Recruiting the neediest kids is a necessary first step towards building an effective summer program, but by itself it is not enough. It is also crucial that the children in the program have quality experiences throughout the summer that keep them learning. Some effective ways to do so include the following:

1. Involve kids' parents.

Undoubtedly, parents serve as the first, longest-lasting, and most important teachers in their children's lives, and a study by the Los Angeles Public Library found that parents were the number one motivator for summer program participation. Involving disadvantaged kids' parents in summer learning can be a difficult goal, but it can be accomplished. Successful summer programs stimulate parent involvement in a variety of ways, a spectrum ranging from inviting parents to a program-end celebration to hiring them as full-time employees of the program, working as tutors or program administrators.

The spectrum of parent involvement includes providing parents with information about what their children are learning and how they are doing; inviting parents to program events and field trips; offering classes on parenting, especially how to develop good literacy habits in their children; offering literacy tutoring for parents who themselves have trouble reading; designing take-home activities to be completed as a family; and recruiting parents as volunteers or hiring them as employees. One of the most common methods of getting parents involved is encouraging them to read with their children for a certain amount of time every day, or to help them to track how much the children read on

their own. For programs like many library reading clubs, whose main goal is to encourage children to read at home, asking parents and children to record how many days each week they read, or are read to, might be preferable to tracking the amount of time, number of pages, or number of books. Having a goal of seven days each week encourages children to view reading as a regular, daily habit, rather than as a special contest to see who can accumulate the greatest number hours, pages, or books in a summer.

One example of a creative way to involve parents is having them read or do other literacy activities with their children for 15-30 minutes when they pick them up or drop them off at a summer program. Libraries in Columbus and Los Angeles are creating summer reading programs for adults, and in Columbus many children urging their parents to register when they sign up for the children's program. The Heads Up program hires a parent at every site to serve as a parent liaison, and actively works to develop their leadership skills and use them as bridges between the program and the neighborhood it serves. Making parents an important part of a program's team can be very useful when trying to figure out how to attract more kids, make a program more convenient for families, or more fully meet the needs of the community.

2. Involve volunteers.

Though many elementary school children are avid readers on their own or with their parents, the kids who most need summer learning programs often need someone else's help in reading. This is why many successful programs get volunteers to work with kids, not only to help them master the mechanics of becoming better readers and students, but also to serve as positive role models sharing the joy of learning.

Finding good, dedicated volunteers is one of the biggest challenges facing summer programs, but there are a number of strategies that can help. One is to tap into existing volunteer networks. Community service organizations, church groups, college volunteer networks, corporate volunteer programs, literacy organizations, senior citizens' groups, libraries, schools, and government volunteer programs can all be good places to find volunteers. Federal service programs such as AmeriCorps and Federal Work-Study pay college students to serve communities. High school and middle school students can also make excellent volunteers. The Camp Birmingham summer program in Alabama offers 400 high school students jobs every summer tutoring elementary and middle schoolers, funded by the city government and the private sector. Especially in small towns, from Rotan, Texas, to Joliet, Illinois, high school volunteers seeking community service experience play an important role in summer learning programs. A growing number of high schools across the country are making community service part of their graduation requirements, and they can be exceptionally good places to find volunteers.

Even elementary school students can serve as tutors. A Houston READ Commission project trains children as young as first grade how to read simple books with preschoolers, and the program is meeting with great success. The elementary schoolers love to read with the younger kids, and plead to go do it again and again. The younger

children are excited to receive so much attention from the older ones, and enjoy the reading sessions just as much. Whether they are first graders or senior citizens, volunteers often gain just as much from their experience as the people they serve do. The benefits of volunteering, the lessons learned in maturity and responsibility, especially for volunteers still in high school or college, can hardly be overstated, and some programs, like Heads Up, even include seminars in which volunteers explore their role in making social change and reflect on their personal growth.

Volunteers are most effective when they have undergone high-quality training, and when they have been provided with ongoing networks of support. In a large program, it is often most effective to have a centralized group of volunteer-trainers who are responsible for an initial training of all of the volunteers in the program, as well as maintaining an ongoing training network to continually improve the volunteers' skills and provide them with support. A review of summer projects affiliated with the America Reads Challenge in 1998 found that high-quality, centralized, ongoing training helped volunteers to reach project goals, use materials appropriately, and work in an informed capacity, with a clearer understanding of what they were doing. Staff of schools, colleges, libraries, and literacy organizations can be useful in providing such training.

3. Make learning fun for everybody.

A really good way to keep kids learning, and to get them excited about learning, is to make learning fun. Successful summer programs almost always have more components than just reading or tutoring, and in providing other fun opportunities for learning they mirror the diverse learning experiences that high-income kids have over the summer months. Helping kids with different, interesting activities is fun for volunteers, too.

Different ways of learning include art, music, dance, drama, storytelling, educational games, science experiments, writing, cooking, gardening, field trips, group reading, and many, many more. Programs that incorporate some of these diverse components are more likely to catch students' varied interests and keep them involved. Kids attending Camp Birmingham participate in athletic activities and receive safety and character education from police officers. Children in the Energy Express program work on community service projects, such as creating books for local libraries, reading to patients at nursing homes and hospitals, and planting trees and
flowers. Children in Seattle's Atlantic Street Center's Summer Academy program put on plays, plant a school garden, and work with architects to design a school beautification project. Kids across the country are enjoying so many different kinds of wonderful, creative activities that it
is impossible here to even scratch the surface of all that is going on.

Keeping a program going strong

Once a program is reaching the children who need it the most, and keeping those children learning over the summer, the major challenge left is keeping the program going strong, continually working to improve it. Below are three good ways to keep a program going

strong: maintaining strong partnerships with many different organizations, fostering a sense of community within the program and around the idea of summer learning, and constantly striving to do better.

1. Maintain strong partnerships.

The benefits of building strong relationships with various organizations in the community can hardly be overestimated. Building strong relationships with all kinds of community partners is a major key to maintaining a steady stream of valuable resources necessary to a program's continued growth. Many different entities in the community, including schools and libraries, community centers and parks departments, small businesses and large corporations, religious groups and local governments, colleges and universities, community colleges and literacy organizations, families and the media, zoos and museums, can all be important providers of precious space, materials, volunteers, publicity, and funds.

Libraries in small towns have found local businesses especially helpful in providing resources for their summer reading clubs, and large summer programs in urban areas have been equally successful in receiving incredible amounts of support (both monetary and in-kind) from large corporations. Community organizations of all kinds have been overwhelming in their generosity to summer learning programs, donating space, materials, and volunteers. Schools have played important roles in donating space and experienced volunteers, developing curriculum and activities, training volunteers, and coordinating large projects spread out over entire school districts. Public and school libraries have been generous in lending books and providing activities. Federal, state, and local governments have also given tremendous support. Still other organizations, from community action agencies to charitable foundations, parent-teacher associations to religious congregations, civic organizations to multinational corporations, all have provided valuable support to summer programs that maintain strong, active relationships with them and express how grateful they are for the support.

2. Foster a sense of community.

Another way to keep a summer program going strong is to cultivate a sense of community both within the program and around the idea of summer learning.

Keeping the same groups of volunteers and kids working together throughout the summer (and, where possible, between summers and across years) is an important part of maintaining a strong program. Maintaining consistency from day to day and week to week, allowing relationships between volunteers and students to develop and grow throughout the summer, is beneficial for children's development. Also, many programs make a point of recruiting the brothers and sisters of children in their programs, thereby forming groups of families that are united by their participation in the program. Also, partnerships between summer programs and other organizations in the community reinforce the idea that learning can take place outside of school, and that the entire community is behind the idea of learning over the summer.

3. Constantly strive to do better.

Good summer learning programs should always be on the lookout for ways they can improve. One good way to do this is to take the initiative to form networks of summer programs, supporting each other, sharing stories of success and failure, as well as discussing new ideas for future innovations. These networks can be as small and informal as the network of librarians in rural Illinois who spread the word when they find a good entertainer for their summer reading clubs, or as large and established as the national listserv dedicated to summer programs.

Successful programs are not afraid to experiment with new ideas, but at the same time they have their feet firmly grounded in reaching the neediest kids and making sure those kids keep learning and growing over the summer. Many summer programs make a great effort to get feedback from the people they serve, and often conduct critical evaluations to assess the quality of their services. Successful programs respond to feedback and evaluations by implementing changes to serve children better and more adequately meet the needs of their communities.